

Mayor Bill de Blasio
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

May 27, 2020

Dear Mayor de Blasio,

Our organizations urge you to implement a network of emergency bus lanes on New York City streets. By taking swift action to prioritize transit, your administration can make the city's recovery stronger and fairer, while rewarding the essential workers who helped the city survive the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Time is of the essence. To lead an equitable recovery for the New Yorkers who have been most affected by the pandemic, City Hall must get out in front of rising car congestion.

Using materials like cones, barrels, and signs to mark off street space for transit, your administration can quickly deliver the improvements NYC bus riders need: 20 miles of busways and bus lanes serving medical facilities and other essential destinations by the end of June, then quickly phasing in 20 additional miles this summer, focusing on streets in the Bronx and Queens that have already been identified for bus priority projects by NYC DOT.

New York City has practice implementing on-street transit priority measures in a matter of weeks, even days. After Superstorm Sandy struck in 2012, the City set up an extensive network of temporary bus lanes practically overnight.

Today, implementing an emergency bus lane network is an urgent matter of racial justice, public health, and economic necessity. Nearly half of regular NYC bus commuters are classified as essential workers. The vast majority are black and brown New Yorkers. They are tending to the sick and vulnerable, ensuring the city doesn't go hungry, and keeping the lights on.

As traffic steeply declined during the peak of the outbreak, buses got these workers to their jobs with impressive reliability, with average speeds increasing 15 percent. This proves that enabling buses to bypass traffic with a comprehensive network of transit-only lanes is absolutely essential to your goal of increasing bus speeds 25 percent. But if the City does not move swiftly, these service improvements will quickly evaporate and become a distant memory.

Even before the "pause" order has been lifted, car traffic is rising rapidly. Without emergency bus lanes in place, New York will soon be overwhelmed by congestion that severely impedes bus service and emergency vehicles. Many essential workers will again be stuck on slow, crowded buses. Gridlock will also slow ambulances, further hampering the pandemic response.

Surveys show many New Yorkers will hesitate to ride the subway until COVID-19 fully recedes. Already, the New York Stock Exchange is urging traders to avoid riding transit to work. But it's physically impossible for the street network to absorb a large shift from subways to car travel. The only way New York's transportation system can adjust is to reallocate street space. Otherwise, Wall Streeters and others who can afford to commute by car will mire essential workers in gridlock.

Recognizing they must place transportation policy on an emergency footing, cities including London, Paris, and Boston have initiated plans to repurpose streets for spatially-efficient modes like buses, biking, and walking. They are converting key streets to bus-only operation and preparing to implement bus lanes with temporary materials. New York must do the same.

With a strong network of emergency bus lanes in place, essential workers can continue to rely on transit, and emergency vehicles can bypass congestion. Furthermore, the capacity of the whole bus network will expand as faster speeds enable service to operate more frequently.

A fast, high-capacity bus network will be critical for public health, both to enable greater physical distancing on transit, and to minimize pollution and other hazards associated with motor vehicle traffic and exhaust.

A recent Harvard study found that particulate matter exacerbated the high COVID-19 mortality rate in New York, causing 249 deaths in Manhattan alone in March. Chronic diseases linked to poor air quality have also contributed to the disparate racial impact of COVID-19. Meanwhile, a Columbia study found that air quality is historically clear and healthy during the current pause.

Building on NYC DOT's existing work for the Better Buses Action Plan, your administration can quickly identify streets where bus lanes and busways are needed. These bus priority measures will complement expansions of street space for walking and biking as transportation, aiding the recovery and enabling the millions of NYC residents who do not own cars to remain mobile. Public messaging from City Hall can help explain the gravity of the situation and necessity of the new measures.

For a strong, healthy, and equitable recovery, City Hall must make the transportation system work for New Yorkers who got the city through the worst of the pandemic. Long stuck with slow bus service, they are now experiencing fast, reliable buses unencumbered by traffic. With a timely and determined response, your administration can preserve these gains and ensure New Yorkers benefit from safe, reliable, fast bus service during and after the recovery.

Signed,

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